

ORDERING PRIORITIES

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The shul was filled to capacity. Both men and women came en masse to hear the famous rabbi known for captivating his audience with his oratorical skills. The speeches were always filled with lessons on self improvement, designed to elicit emotion, to deliver a powerful message yet in the most gentle of ways.

The rabbi began this particular lecture describing a man. This man desired to spiritually elevate himself, to further sanctify himself to the service of G-d. So what did this man do? He decided that he needed to fast, to deprive himself of all sustenance. After all, the Talmud writes (Ta'anis 11a) that one who sits and fasts is called "holy." He began his day with impassioned prayer, asking for forgiveness and the ability to come closer to G-d. He then sat down to spend the rest of the day engrossed in Torah study. However, as the day progressed, he found himself growing weaker and weaker, and his ability to concentrate severely decreased. He actually had to stop learning, as he could not accomplish anything in his weakened state. After quickly reciting the requisite afternoon and evening prayers, he rushed home, eagerly awaiting the sumptuous meal his wife prepared for the occasion.

He arrived home to no such meal. In fact, his wife had totally forgotten about her husband's fast and that he would be home earlier than usual. Even the regular dinner she prepared was not yet ready. The man was livid. "How could you do this to me!" he bellowed. "Don't you have any respect for your husband? Don't you care at all? Don't you realize what I put myself through today?" he screamed. His anger totally consumed him: any feelings of holiness that had been present earlier in the day were most definitely gone.

The rabbi then delivered his message. "Look at this man: he wanted to engage in an activity that would lead to holiness. But what happened? Instead, he squandered away a day of Torah study. Not only did he not respect his wife properly, but he denigrated her and lost his temper! Our Sages have told us that those who lose their temper are like idol worshipers - and those who sin against their fellow man - even Yom Kippur cannot atone for those transgressions! This man, who thought that by engaging in a totally optional behavior, was doing something praiseworthy, ended his day by transgressing basic Torah precepts! Had he just studied Torah properly and kept his anger and haughtiness in check, he would have reached much greater heights than by engaging in a futile fast."

The rabbi continued to speak to an enraptured crowd. Upon the conclusion of the lecture, a man

approached the rabbi and kissed him. He told the rabbi "You speak the truth - the words of G-d are in your mouth! The illustration you gave of the man who fasted - that is exactly what happened to me! I cannot tell you how glad I am to have heard your words. You have opened my eyes as to what is truly a priority in life. I now have to always remember that the most important things have to come first - that it is silly and counter-productive to engage in optional, laudatory practices if the result is going to be the transgression of basic Torah precepts."

Rabi Avraham Dayan of Aleppo notes that the Pesach celebration at the evening meal is called the "Seder." "Seder" means "order." We are supposed to learn from this order. After we have recited the main liturgy of the evening during the step of Magid, we then come to three different "eatings:" Matzo, Maror and Korech. The order of these three steps, Rabi Dayan states, is noteworthy. First, we consume the matzo. The consumption of the matzo is biblical in origin, a Mitzvah D'Oraisa. Next, we consume maror. The consumption of maror is rabbinic in origin, a Mitzvah D'Rabanan. Last, we consume Korech, the maror sandwich. Doing such is a "custom," albeit one we have accepted upon ourselves as obligatory ages ago. We see how we are to view miztvos from the order of the Seder: Those precepts contained in the Torah are our top priority. Then, we must be concerned with those precepts of rabbinic origin. Only once we have fulfilled these two mandatory levels can we engage in "custom," those practices that are not obligatory. The failure to keep these practices in their proper prioritization, as seen from the parable offered by Rabi Dayan, can have disastrous effects. That is the lesson of Matzo, Maror, and Korech.